





Coraddi

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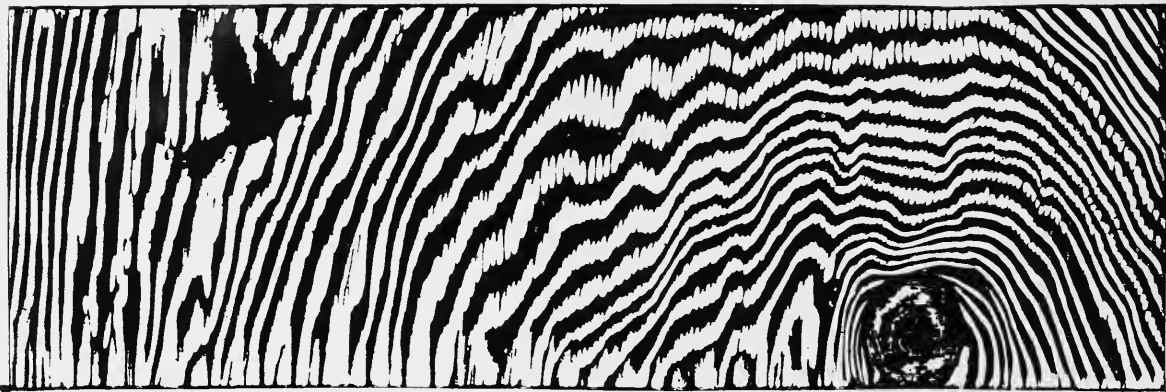
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The Barn

by Anna Wooten

I was afraid of the store. It was just a country store, a crackerbox on cement haunches in the fork of a dusty road. On winter evenings, when the wind was so strong it whipped the tassels off cornstalks, I went to the store with Mr. Dan, my grandfather, because he made me go, because he knew I'd stand gaping in front of the glass-counter world of tootsie rolls and Mary Jane's dreaming of a coney island full of candy instead of ferris wheels. He knew I was afraid of the men that gathered there with their stubbly beards and tractor talk and rough hands. They were lumberjack-big. Even then I thought that—lumberjack-big. And I was small for my age. So small I couldn't even rub the top of the counter with my nose. So small the bubble gum on the bottom shelf looked far away as heaven.

"Goldilocks," he said one night shuffling down the lane with me beside him. "Those men are farming men. They've got to have large rough hands to plant crops and rub the flanks of mules. They've got to laugh hard and be husky to live the life they live." I didn't believe him. He

didn't have rough hands and a laugh coarse as burlap. But I just kept walking, kicking stones at random, saying nothing. Finally he scratched his head, shook it, and said, "Looks like rain to me. Smell it in the air." I saw him grin. I saw his gold tooth flash in the nearby lights of the store. He always grinned. Like he knew something no one else knew and he wasn't telling.

But more than the men, I was afraid of the stove. It sat in the middle of the bare room, a pot-bellied sort of stove, spewing and spitting, getting angrier and angrier all the time. It gave off too much warmth. Sometimes it got so hot I almost went berserk. First I'd feel dizzy, then the glass on the counters would start to melt and flow like a big river breaking ice in the spring. And Aunt Sadie (everybody called her Aunt Sadie) sat, toothless, in a long black dress dipping snuff and spitting into an old can with a Maxwell House label on it. The stove hummed and the men roared and Mr. Dan sat rocking with a mischievous glint in his eye, in a brown hat pulled over his ears. He could rock his way to Alabama and back. I just wanted

to run, forever and ever, in a long cornfield covered with frost and cold black earth. A big cornfield lit with metallic stars and stalks of corn so huge they could hold up the sky if they wanted to. Because then no one could find me. I would freeze to death with the furrow of the field for my grave. It was a delicious thought, a beautiful thought, in the heat of the tiny wooden store. I bet someone could have brought a leaf of tobacco to that store and it would have cured itself.

Mr. Dan was married to Miss Sophie, Miss Sophie taught Sunday school and was fat. She looked like a big rolled-out biscuit with blue eyes in the middle. When she walked the kitchen floor shook, but it was lopsided anyway and went down in a slant. This gave the room a distorted look, like a funny mirror at the fair. When I sat on the high end of the floor eating apple pie on a stool I looked bigger, felt bigger anyway, than Miss Sophie on the low end chopping up collards.

For my tenth birthday Miss Sophie made me a big blueberry waffle and stuck a candle in it. She gave me syrup, too, thick and goeey like honey. It smelled like manna, I thought. I didn't know what manna was but I heard it in Sunday school and never thought about it much till I got the blueberry waffle. I ate it in front of the fire in the Comfort Room with Mr. Dan rocking beside me. The whole time I hummed and thought about manna. Manna sounded just like that waffle tasted, that beautiful waffle with all the sweet, streamy syrup running over the sides.

I also got a pearl necklace from Mr. Dan. It was a real pearl necklace, too, that Mr. Dan's mother had given him to sell. Only he never sold it. He saved the necklace for me. After I ate the waffle and put the necklace in the pocket of my jeans, Mr. Dan sat jabbing at the embers with a poker, a corduroy frown on his face. His eyes had a liquid look and he kept mopping his hair back with his hand, shaking his head over and over again. Finally, he looked up, his arms dangling over his knees, his toes pointed into an inverted V.

"Sophie. I think you ought to know. Goldilocks is growing up."

Miss Sophie just sat there shelling peas in a big pan on her lap. Three years seemed to pass. It was quiet, real quiet, except for the crackle of the fire or a charred log settling down to a lower berth. And the "pop" of beans. With steady hands, Miss Sophie undressed one after the other and threw them naked and green on a newspaper. She scooped one up, pressed down with her thumb, *pop*, pulled the sides apart, *splish*, plucked it out of its rubbery womb and *splat*, it landed with precision in the rectangle of newspaper.

"Well, Dan. She's only ten years old and the way I see it (*chi-i iinnng*—her ring hit the metal pan) she still has quite a way to go. My mother never did believe (pause—she couldn't get the pea out of its jacket) that I (pause again—it landed on the rug) was fully grown until . . ."

"Sophie. Quit popping those goddamn peas. Do you hear?" Slowly, Never raised his voice. The words came out like oil.

"Yes, Dan. Sorry. (*Pop*) Oops. Habit, you know. Like a ball in motion. Well, just let me finish this one. Then I'll stop." (*splish, splat*). "Now, Dan, you were saying that . . ." (*crunch*) Mr. Dan was folding up the peas in the paper, (*thud*), They landed in a ball on the four-poster bed.

Mr. Dan passed his hands over his eyes, "I was saying that the girl is growing up. I'm going to give her some responsibility. Damn. She's not a colt any more. Maybe still a little wobbly but not a colt." And he cupped his hands like parentheses, like they were the boundaries that stood between the world and me.

"She's knowledgeable for a girl. I'll say that," Miss Sophie winked at me.

"No. She's not knowledgeable. The girl's not knowledgeable. But she has got spunk. She's tramped over every mile of pasture I own, every cornfield. Even North Wood. She's the only living person except for me of course who's spent whole days going as deep back into the woods as the timber. She's killed a rattlesnake, planted a garden, and can cornshuck like forty hells. Any girl who can do this, who can string up hams and clean fish and run the dogs is grown."

That's the most words Mr. Dan ever said in his life at one time.

"Well, Dan. What have you got in mind?" Miss Sophie just sat there tapping her feet with her arms circled around the pan.

"The barn. She's going to work in the barn. Hand tobacco. Get paid, just like all the rest."

"I don't want to hand," I cried. "I want to pass sticks."

"Humph. Pass sticks next year. Plenty of time. Only men pass sticks as a rule. Sometimes a strong woman. Never girls."

"But I'm not a colt. You said I wasn't a colt. Maybe a little wobbly but not a colt!" I said it just as he had said it, only more exaggerated. Mr. Dan turned his head to one side. I know he smiled. I just know he did. But only the black night coming in through the windowpanes knows for sure. He kept his head turned a long time.

"Dan." Miss Sophie's voice was soft, "She's only a girl. Not full-grown. She can work a *half* a day." She said *half* in the same wistful way she said *love*. "Half a day's enough. Full day's work—five in the morning till sundown with only an hour break at noon. Is that what you want?"

Mr. Dan's jaw dropped just a little and he looked suddenly haggard. "She can work as long or as little as she pleases. She can work one hour or five. She can work the whole day or half. But she gets paid, like the rest."

"Like the rest," Miss Sophie echoed and clapped her plump hands together with finality. And then again, as hushed as an Amen, "like the rest."

I was thrilled. Mr. Dan would be proud of me. I'd work harder than anyone and all day, too, first day. And I would never be back late from lunch. Not even if Miss Sophie pleaded with me to eat "just one more dumplin', just one more dumplin'" sort of singsong, like when she coaxed cough medicine into me. I wouldn't do it. I'd jump up from the table and be the first hand back.

We were "putting in" two days after Mr. Dan told me I could hand. I just sort of lolligagged around the creek and stomped on ant hills. I felt funny inside but it was a good funny. Squiggly. I felt all squiggly. My stomach, my lungs, my heart, all of me—squiggly. And I felt a little sad, too. Not because I couldn't play all the time anymore or shuck corn like forty hells. Not because I was kissing all the things I'd ever loved good-bye because I wasn't. But because maybe I was still a colt, see, and there was this open pasture that was mine and suddenly someone puts a fence in the middle of it and you don't have to jump it but it's there. You know someday you're going to jump it anyway, and you got to jump it too because you'd be an ignorant horse just to let it sit there and ignore it and never find out what it was. I mean you want to jump it, just to see if you can anyhow. Because maybe in the instant you feel yourself going over it you change, like magic, from a colt to a mare. That's great. I mean it's really great. Only maybe you don't want to be a colt or a mare. Maybe you want to be a mare-colt or maybe even a blade of grass. It's not like because I was going to do a job and get paid for it meant I'd have to be a farmer for the rest of my life or I'd be chained to a tobacco cart. It wasn't even like I'd never see a blue rag of sky again or a stubborn old tree stump or the moon, pale as a cracker, cruising by over my head. Because if it did, I'd die. I mean I'd just lie right flat down in that old pasture and kick out. But deep down in my stomach muscles, where my heart is, I knew as sure as gunpowder that it was going to be different after that. The moon would be a harvest moon and I'd never look at it without thinking of big green leaves on stalks somewhere out in the field quivering, waiting to be plucked, harvested. Mr. Dan must have known it, too, because he was acting awfully funny. Somehow I could sense something, something besides Mr. Dan, besides me.

I was by the creek thinking in this way, pulling the string back and forth on my moccasins, when I heard the grass rustle and saw Jimmy Bryson stick his head through the briars on the other side of the creek.

"What'cha doing?"

"Thinking how to blow the world up," I said.

"Oh yeah? Well, that's really funny. That's so goddamn funny I'm just gong to roll over on the ground and laugh myself to death." And he did, only it was pretty faky. He looked like an idiot lying there laughing, clawing the dirt. He felt like an idiot too because I didn't even look. I just tugged at my moccasin string.

After a while he got up, shaking off the dirt, and jumped the creek. He was awful. Once I saw him roll a whole glob of pimento cheese around his mouth with his

tongue till it was caked over his lips, his chin, and under his nose. The rest of that afternoon I sat in the school bathroom vomiting. He was nauseating anyway but that really fixed it.

"How long you been sitting over here?"

"All morning. I brought a lunch. Got on a tick-tocker?"

"Yeah. It's four-thirty. What kind of kid are you, anyway? You hibernating or something?"

"Yes. I'm hibernating. Don't you see my fur? What kind of kid are you, anyway? Can't you even tell when someone's hibernating?"

Yeah. Well, look. I think you ought to go home."

"Go home? What for? This is my creek. I haven't seen your ticket yet anyway. Where's your ticket?"

"What goddamned ticket? I don't have to have a ticket. I can go anywhere I please. What kind of ticket?"

"A ticket that gives your name, age, date of birth, you know. Credentials. You got to have credentials to come on my property. Tells about your family tree, who your grandfather was, what kind of family you have, what they did, who they were. Where is it? I know you've got it. You wouldn't dare come without it."

"Look, I aint got no goddamned ticket. I think you better go home, smart-ass."

"What? And leave you here to pillage my property? Vandal. Never."

"What do you do? Eat a Webster's for breakfast every morning? Don't use any goddamned big words around me."

"I read a lot."

"Don't have any boyfriends. Is that why you read? You're ugly. No boy'll talk to you."

"If I'm so ugly what are you hanging around for then? Tell me that. You waiting for a big earthquake or something?"

"I don't have anything better to do."

"Well, hang around. There's going to be a movie here soon. A big drive-in movie. Behind those trees over there. A big screen. Long about dark, well not really, I mean right when the sun gets low enough in the sky so its level with the screen, the trees fall down and this big screen rolls out, see, and the sun projects like in a real movie. It projects all the things it has seen through the day. It takes pictures like a camera, snapping people, houses, and stuff as it moves overhead. It's a miracle. And then, when it's just ready to drop from sight it stops with a jerk, see, like an elevator. Just clicks into place and there you have it. A big movie. Sometimes you can see yourself in it if you look real hard. You can see your own house and everything. It's beautiful. But you got to have a ticket. If you don't have a ticket you can't see it. I mean

you could sit right here and I could see it and you couldn't."

"You got a ticket?"

"That's different. It's my land, my drive-in. I'm special. I can see it anytime. Like a real movie. Only no popcorn. You got to bring your own popcorn."

"You're crazy."

"No. You're crazy. You're the one without a ticket."

"I don't believe you. What a crazy idea."

"I never lie. Only you think I am. Because you come ready to see a certain kind of movie. There are only a few movies you could see. You probably couldn't see this one. Maybe it's good you don't have a ticket. Then I can see it by myself. That's better anyway. Hey! Someone's burning leaves or something. There's a funny smell in the air."

"That's what I was trying to tell you before you started talking about that silly movie. You'd better get home. A barn burned down at your place. About half an hour ago. Burned right down to the ground."

At first I just sat there. Then I started flinging my fists in all wild directions, beating the air with my hands. When I finally found Jimmy Brysen's shoulder I tore into it, pounding and pounding till I found his chest. Ripping open his jacket I ground into his abdomen, clawing, kicking at the clumsy stumps of his legs. He slapped me. Hard. I felt the blood dribbling from the side of my lip but the taste just made me want to kill him all the worse. "You *dumb ass!* You *jumbling, cocky dumb ass!*" And I kept kicking, pounding, yelling "dumb ass" till it echoed all over the world. I was sobbing, choking, and each thrust at him was punctuated with another sob till I could no longer breathe. I was gasping for air. "*Graham* crackers for brains." Sob, thrust. "Idiot child. *Dumb ass!*" And then I broke into a run, stumbling, picking myself back up in a mad fury, everything around me spinning. Suddenly the whole world, houses, trees, was a turned-up hour-glass, a snow-scene paper weight, only colorless. Just a mass of runny browns and grays on the blot of my mind.

When I reached the house I tore through the screen door yelling their names. There was no one. Racing through the kitchen, frantically, I ran into the table, already set for supper. The silver bounced on the floor with an alarming metal ring, some bowls broke, but I never stopped, just ran out the back door and out to the barn. The grass under my bare toes was a fantasy. I never felt it. First the stable flew by me, then the packhouse, but I felt stationary, like I was running in place. And finally the barn. It was burnt to the ground all right. I stopped, shocked myself by wanting to laugh at the flatness, the insipidness of what had once been a wooden monster. It was reduced to an anthill, a pile of blackened forms. A flop of a marshmallow.

Mr. Dan stood in the middle of it with his hat in his hand. Out of reverence, I suppose, for a barn. Just a lot of shingles and wood. I called to him from where I stood

and he looked up and waved weakly at me with the flat side of his hand. And then I started towards him, kicking at the debris in my way.

"Mr. Dan. I was at the creek."

"Yeah. I know."

"Mr. Dan, we can build a new barn real soon, can't we?"

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry about the old barn though, Mr. Dan."

He didn't say anything.

"How did it happen?"

Nothing.

"Mr. Dan, I'm going to grow up without that barn. I don't need a barn to make me grow up. Is that what you thought, Mr. Dan? That that barn was going to help me see something I already know about?"

He pulled his hat down over his ears.

"Mr. Dan. I don't understand about the barn. Why was it so important anyway? Huh, Mr. Dan?"

There we stood, the two of us, with the sunset dripping over the corners of the sky, in the middle of charred wood.

"Better to burn down than to drop from old age, Mr. Dan."

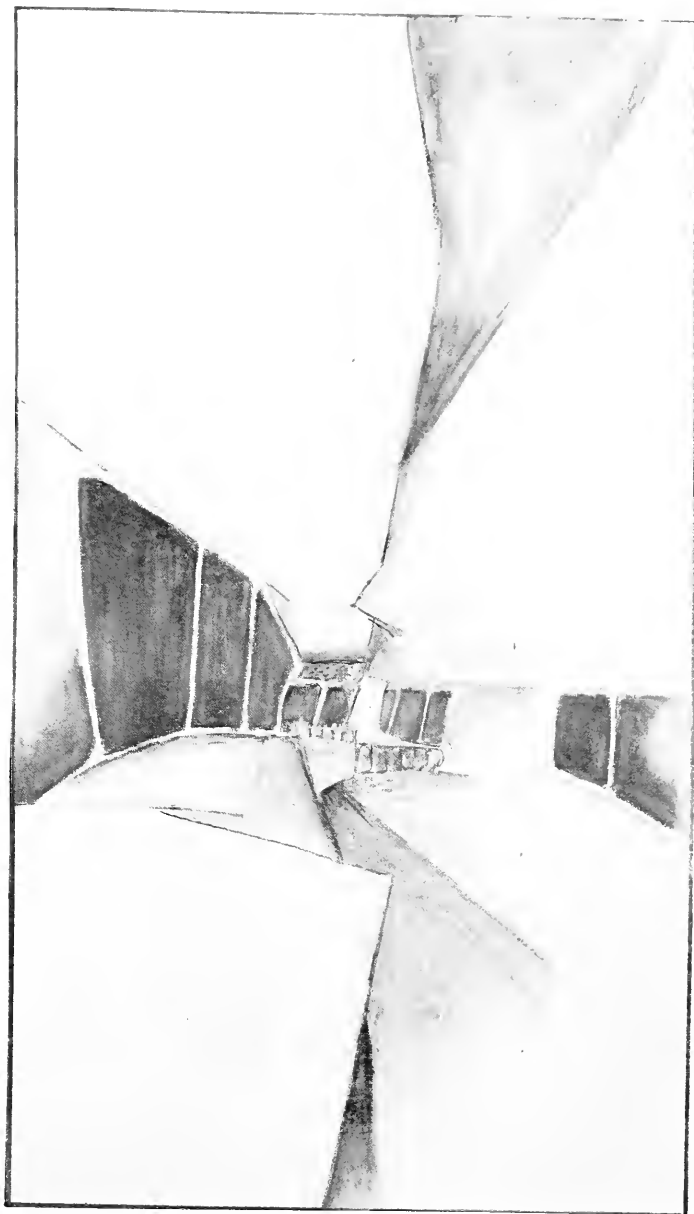
"Yeah."

"Mr. Dan. Do you want me to go away?"

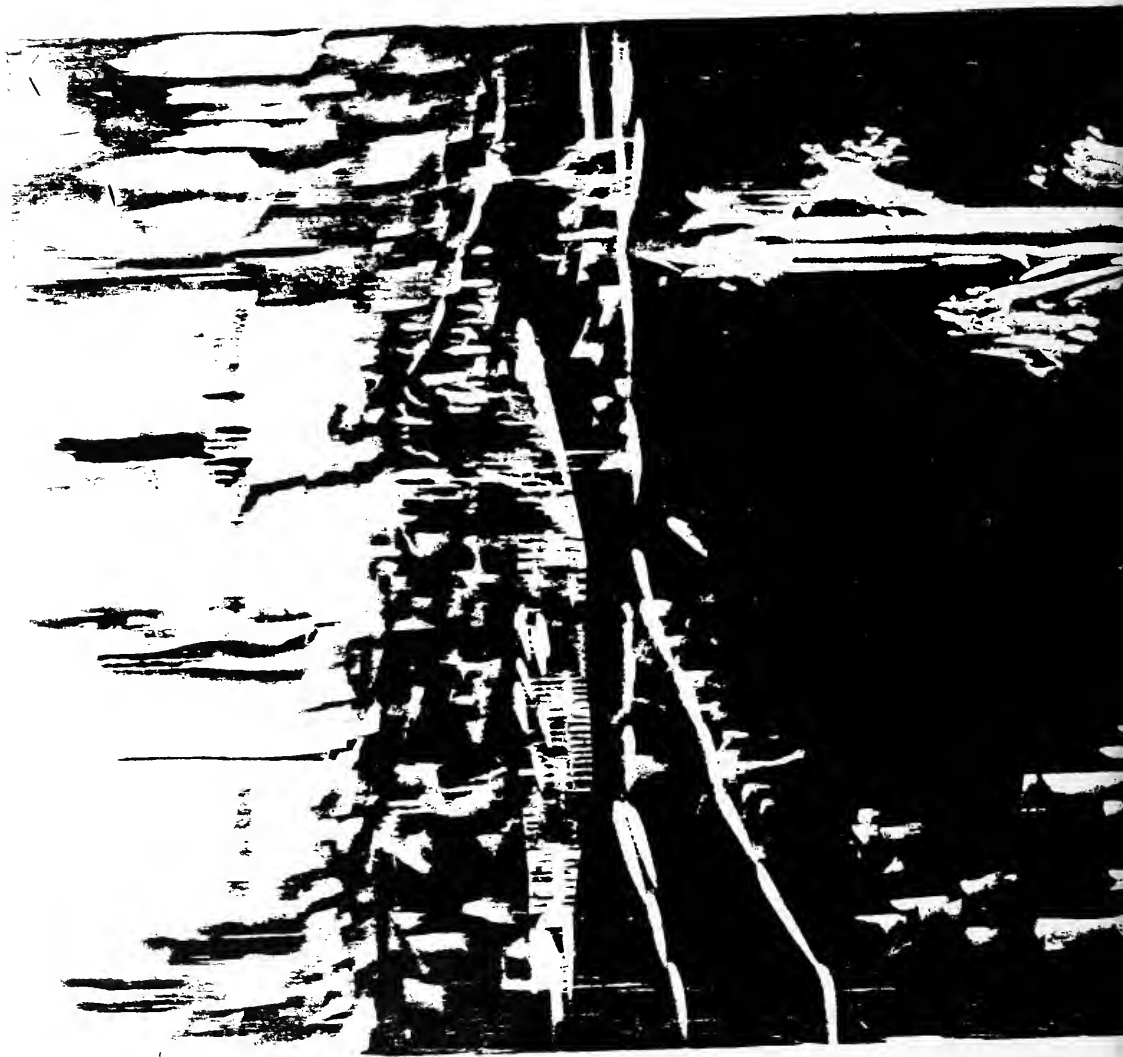
"Yeah."

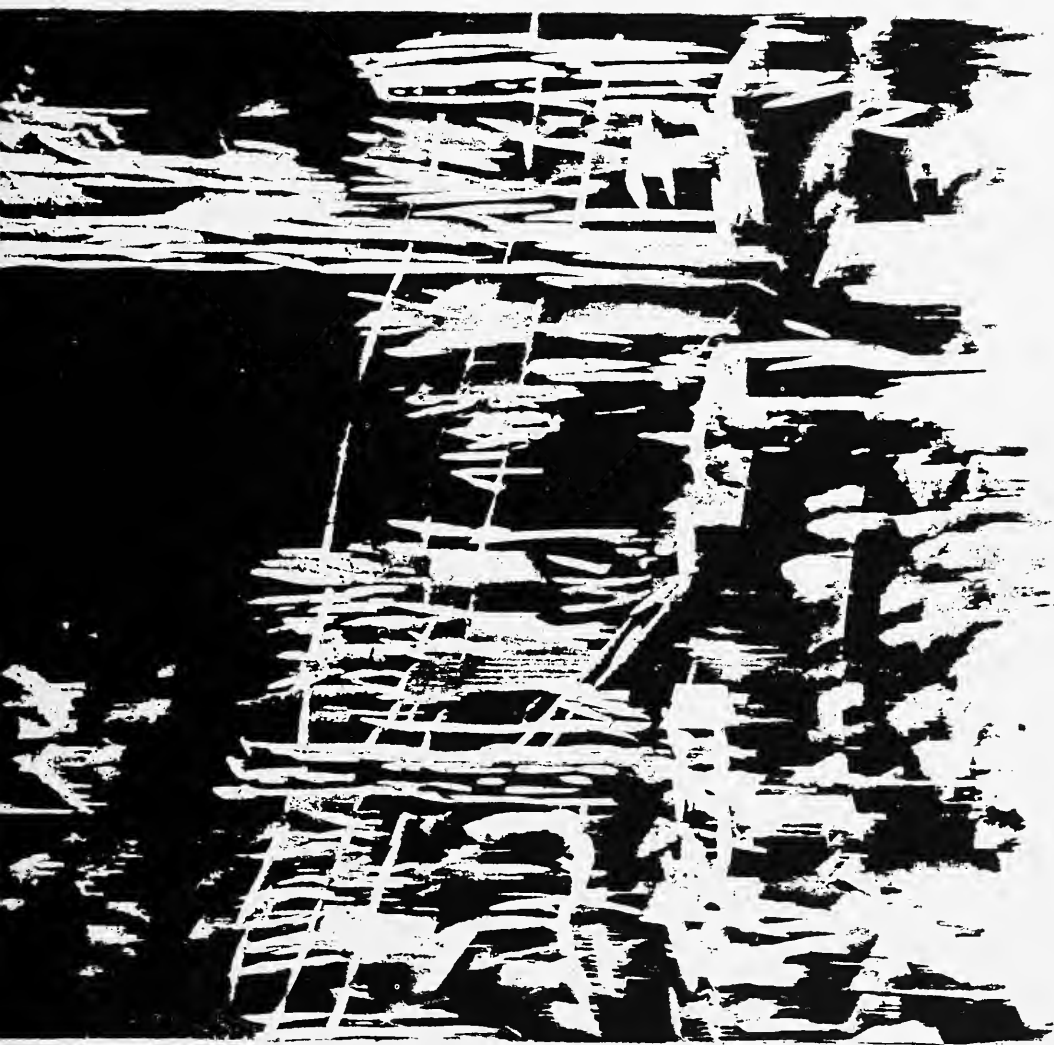
So I started back to the house leaving him where he stood. When I looked back he still had his hat pulled down over his ears, his hands in his pockets, all hunched over. I felt pretty bad about Mr. Dan and all. Maybe I didn't understand. I knew Miss Sophie wouldn't be as upset about the barn as Mr. Dan. Miss Sophie would just go on shelling peas and humming. She always hummed when bad things happened as if humming made it all better somehow. Once Miss Sophie sliced her finger open cutting a ham with a butcher knife. It looked so awful I cried. But she just put me beside her in the old Buick and hummed herself to the hospital. Not Mr. Dan. You would think he had a bag of gold in that barn, the way he was acting. I guess the barn took a lot of memories with it when it went down. I figured maybe the memories seemed charred like the wood to Mr. Dan. It was hard to say. Maybe I *couldn't* understand. Maybe only Mr. Dan knew. But, after all, it was just an old barn. Just an old wooden monster with a lot of teathy beams and crumbly shingles. So what? Who cared about it anyway? Not me.

But even though I skipped down to the pasture past the stable and cleared the fence with one hand I felt like someone had dropped a weight down my throat. Anyway, I did make it home . . . just in time to talk Miss Sophie into fixing pork chops and fried squash for dinner.



"HOUSE OF GOD"





Michael

Mary Laughridge

Michael peeped around the screen door, blinked at the smattering of grownups on the lawn, and ducked back into the shade of the porch. The door slammed behind him with a thud.

"Michael!"

The mother-call was met by the padding of bare feet in the house, then silence.

"Michael?"

A chair scraped in the kitchen and a small head of tousled hair emerged at the window. "What?"

"Didn't I tell you to come on outside?"

The four-year-old pushed his nose against the screen and squinted. "Huh?"

"You heard me. What are you standing on?"

"Yeah, but it's not time to eat yet and you're not doing anything out there. A chair."

The mother-voice lowered. "Come on out now. Put it back where it was." The mother shaded her eyes and peered at the small form behind the screen. "RIGHT NOW." She watched until the tousled head disappeared, then turned back to the group on the lawn.

Sitting cross-legged in a wicker chair, Jenny let her gaze drop from the window to the grass. She sat in the sun, a long-legged girl of nearly twenty, as her cousin,

Michael's mother, approached her and sat beside her. "Michael this, Michael that," the mother sighed.

The flames leaped high on the charcoal grill and the raw hamburgers waited cold in the shade just inside the porch. The screen door slammed behind the boy as he skipped across the cool, prickly grass to the patch of sunlight where the grownups sat noisily doing nothing. Jenny glanced up and winked at him, and he sprawled in the grass beside her.

"Jenny, let's go down to the creek!" he whispered loudly.

"The creek?" She glanced at her watch. "We don't really have time before we eat, do we?"

"Yes we do! I want to go now."

The girl hesitated. "I'll take you down after lunch, O.K.?"

"Uh-uh! Let's go now, please?"

It was the mother who answered. "Michael Anderson! Jenny is our guest and she might like to sit down by herself for one minute."

"Then I'll go by myself!" he wailed.

Jenny shoved back her chair. "I'll go with him, Betty. We'll only be a minute."

"Jenny, you don't have to do that," the mother sighed.

"No, I don't mind. Really."

"That's not the point. You let him treat you just like a playmate, you know—he'll take advantage of you if you let him."

Michael bolted in the direction of the creek, stopped, and stood dancing on the grass a few yards away. "Come on, Jenny!" he called.

The mother shook her head. "O.K. Go on! Just like a playmate . . ."

Michael led the way down the grassy slope that spilled from the Andersons' back yard into the creek bed. The water shimmered between slabs of mossy rock and poured free in little eddies, sifting past the muddy pools of scum that lay along its body. The boy skidded to a halt on the grass beside the water. "Isn't it pretty?" he said.

"Yes, it is," his companion wheezed as she caught up with him.

Michael knelt and leaned over the water, so close that he could reach out and feel the cool shudder of the stream on his fingers. "I wonder if there are any minnows in there?" he whispered.

Jenny lowered herself on the cool grass beside him. "I don't see anything," she replied.

"There are!" Michael whispered excitedly. "I saw a bubble." Sitting up, he found a stray oak leaf and let it fall into the water. It sailed toward the rocks as though the pool were a harbor.

Michael jumped to his feet. "You have to take off your shoes," he told her.

"Hey, no, I don't think we should go wading right now," she replied.

"I'm not going wading. I want to show you my place."

"Your place?"

"I have a secret place — it's just mine because nobody else uses it — for crossing the water. But it's mine forever."

"For crossing?" She glanced dubiously at the wide creek. "Maybe we'd better not, Michael. We only have a few minutes."

"But I have to show you! Come on. You can trust me. Please?"

Perhaps he did have to show her, she thought. "Well, O.K.," she said, "as long as it doesn't take long."

It's over here," he bubbled, skipping beside the water to a large flat rock. She followed slowly, watching the water spill timelessly over the rocks, and thought, "forever . . ." She wondered whether crickets sang near the stagnant pools of the creek bed and if the nights were warm and windy beside the water.

"Follow me!" Michael was a navigator and he climbed the rock in no time at all. Jenny kicked off her shoes and stepped cautiously beside him. Ahead, a series of rocks rose and fell in precarious positions across the water.

Michael stood at the edge of the big rock uncertainly. "Maybe you'd better hold my hand," he said. "I might fall."

She grasped his tiny hand and he leaped cautiously onto the next rock. She followed, and together they scrambled onto the third. The creek was not deep, but she kept his hand in hers. She could have told him that that his creek would someday dry in the sun; the hours would lift its face; and someday his harbor would no longer flow—but she did not. Why did she have to think about that? Michael grinned at her and she glanced ahead. They were three-fourths of the way across and there were no more rocks. "What now?" she asked.

Michael took a deep breath. "We get on that big log and hold onto the branches of that tree — you can reach it from the log — and go on across."

She peered at the log doubtfully. "Are you sure we haven't come far enough?"

"No! I've done it before. Come on. We have to jump." He stepped forward, then hesitated. "But keep holding my hand," he added.

She held on tight as he reached toward the log with his foot, then made a little jump. She stepped onto the log behind him and they climbed to the bank, free.

"See!" Michael beamed. "I told you we could do it! I bet you thought we'd drown!"

She laughed. "O.K. You're a good leader! Now let's go back."

"No. Not yet," he begged, scrambling to a higher perch among the water weeds on the bank. "Come on! I'll show you where the Maxwells live."

"The who?"

"The Maxwells. They're our neighbors. They live right up there. I can show you!"

How could she tell him that she couldn't care less where the Maxwells lived? He watched her with dancing eyes, waiting for her to follow.

"We'll go," she sighed. "Lead on."

They brushed through the trees and felt the cool fingers of the weeds on their arms. He led her from the shade to a sunny, empty lot, and the dry grass clung to them as they reached the road. Michael pointed. "It's up there."

She squinted against the glare. "Which house?"

"You can't see it yet. It's behind that house with the green roof."

"Oh! Michael, how much further is it?"

"It won't take long. It's right up here."

"We promised your mother we'd be right back, remember?"

"We'll be there in just a minute! Come on! I want to show you."

She shook her head. "O.K., then, if it's not too much further."

They followed the narrow pavement past rows and rows of houses. Michael skipped a little ahead of her. "Now you can almost see it!" he said.

"That's close enough, then. We'd better start back."

"No! It's just up here!" The street ahead curved sharply to the left, and he ran to the curve. "There it is!" He gazed toward the houses at his left and pointed excitedly. "You can just see it behind those trees. The brick one with the white roof."

She followed his gaze and saw rows of ordinary houses on the other side of the street.

"Do you see it?" he asked. She turned to look at him at his sparkling eyes, and nodded. She remembered leaf patterns, and a little path that led among the heavy branches to a cool shelter, where time had stood still. The sun felt suddenly heavy on her lids and she closed her eyes.

"We can go back now, I guess," Michael told her. He was smiling when she opened her eyes.

She nodded again. "I guess we can."



A. M.

I walk to class at
fifteen to eight;
it's cold.

Breath like balloons,
lacking only the words
to fill them in.

The sunlight blinds me
to those ahead.

I remember riding the mare on the grounds
with the boys running
behind me.

We are all like horses.

— *Ellen Karnowski*





The Joke

Mary Fond Daughtridge

Timmie held out a jade-green sweater so new that it still retained its store-smell. She queried her roommate, Ellen, with "Isn't it gorgeous? Mama sent it to me for my birthday."

"Beautiful," conceded Ellen in a voice as soft as the Georgian cotton bolls of her home. Then she walked into the small piece of the dorm that was half hers, tied a rope around the base of the monstrous overhead light, stepped on a chair, inserted her neck, kicked the chair out from under herself, and hung until she never had to compliment another jade-green sweater.

That's the way it happened—"as unexpected as an O. Henry ending and as shocking, in its way, as *Candy*," said our House Counselor, who pictures herself as an intellectual. I don't know, things like this happen, and they bother you, a lot at first, but the real shock comes when you realize how quickly the shock is gone. I mean, that was a human life—a girl who laughed and sang and probably cried, although none of us had ever seen her cry.

All the girls in our section were pretty upset. Separated from the rest of the dorm by a hallway, there were only the eight of us—Kim and me, Nesla Ginlam (my parents went in for the unusual), then Ellen and Timmie, Karen and Martha Jane, and Joanne and Pat. We got along as well as most, but to tell the truth, I could have done fine without anyone else around except Kim and Ellen.

Anyway, Timmie had come back from French that day in one of her better moods because Friday afternoon had finally come, and Fridays meant Jim, dancing, beer, and love's talk in the back seat of the car. When she first opened the door, the slender form hung so unobtrusively from the lamp that Timmie was unable to realize for a second just what had happened. In that timeless moment, the body hobbled around, causing the abruptly protruding eyes to stare placidly at Timmie.

Timmie fainted: when the doctor came, she got more attention than the new overhead fixture. But then, as the doctor said later, you can't do anything to help the dead; the live ones have a hard enough time.

No sooner had the doctor finished reviving Timmie

than Karen came in. Now, Karen has some good qualities, maybe even several, but she is pretty efficient at camouflaging them. For a split second there was deep silence, then bedlam burst the air.

"Jesus-God! Tell me you're kiddin' me, man. Damn, I'm just not believing this—who would have thought that Ellen—hell, she was the happiest one of—God DAMN!"

The doctor didn't bother to raise his eyebrows, but Timmie began screaming and she didn't quit until the rest of us could be heard thundering toward the room. The doctor stepped outside before we reached the door.

"Girls, I want you to stay out of here. One of the girls in this section, Ellen Bursley, has committed suicide. I'm sorry to break it to you in this manner. Now, her roommate is in a very bad state of shock, so I'd like for you to keep the noise down until we get her calmed."

Dear God, but it was quiet. Go in that room? Unhuh, our curiosity wasn't that strong. We all went into our respective rooms, sat on our beds, and stared at our roommates. In our room, my words cracked the silence first.

"Ellen wouldn't do that." I wasn't sorry yet; all I could feel was shock.

"I guess she would." Kim's beach-tanned face showed no indication of argumentation: she was just trying to straighten things out in her mind.

We talked right on when we heard the quick staccato of high heels in the corridor, and we talked right on when we heard the several heavy clumps that marked the tread of the men who had come to take the body away. We talked until the pinks and blues of the sky melted into darkness, but our talk was good only in that it helped us understand each other better.

Seven o'clock found Karen, Joanne, and Martha Jane in our room.

"Goddam! I'm just not believing this."

"Karen, please! For once in your life, have a little respect. God has seen fit to take a life—we can only trust in his will and hope for the best."

"Oh, hell."

"Whaddahya' mean — we can only trust in — "as usual, Joanne was spluttering so angrily that she couldn't spit out what she was saying. Recovering, she jabbed a finger at Martha Jane, the God-girl, and continued, "You Southern Baptists! Doesn't anything ever occur to you that hasn't been spoon-fed to you from your Silver Chalice?"

(Joanne was always a bit more sure of her protestations than of that which she protested.) "Death is the mystery of life. Not that death means the end of life—"

"Oh, hell."

"No, I mean it. The only real evidence of our life is our thoughts, which are in the form of thought waves, which are generated by electrical impulses. The electrical impulses will remain on the earth forever, which means there is no death."

"Oh, hell." This time Kim and I had joined Karen's chorus.

"You are right, Joanne, when you say there is no death. There is no death because through death we are given eternal life."

"Oh, hell." This time we swelled the Oh-h-h to epic proportions.

"Well, you're going there, you know," accused Jane, her sanctimonious round toad eyes bugging out. Her fat jowls swayed with indignation in the face of our sins.

"Who's going where? Yours truly is going insane. Welcome me back from the hospital, me and five thousand tranquilizers." We drew nearer to Timmie as she walked into the room, curiosity drawing us nearer, as when filth attracts flies. "My God, you'll never know how I felt when I walked into that room. Why me—why was it my roomie who had to go psycho? I seem to have a talent for getting in these situations."

"Timmie, you should have known Ellen better than any of us: why do you think she did it? Ellen never seemed like the suicide type to me. Had she been upset about anything lately?"

"No, you know Ellen and her sense of humor; she always seemed pretty satisfied. I just can't imagine her doing this to me. The only thing to do now is to try to just go on as if everything were normal; that's what Ellen would want."

Well, this really bugged me. I hate these people who say "John would want the show to go on . . ." as if everybody didn't know that this is the polite way to keep other people's deaths from being a hindrance. Look, when I die, I want everything to stop for everybody else, too, at least for a moment.

I knew Timmie would continue for hours, telling us the trials and tribulations of having a corpse for a roomie, pausing only briefly for the argumentative interruptions of the others.

Oh, hell.

There is something of a circus in every funeral parlor. The coffin, the main attraction, is heralded by millions of flowers that act as barkers, screaming out, "Here it is, folks. Step right up and look at the stiff. The only price is a few uncomfortable minutes with family."

I didn't look in; I never do. When I get back, we'll be sitting around one day and someone will say, "Nesla, how did Ellen look—could you tell where the rope had been?"

When I say I didn't look, they'll all think how

sensitive I am and hate me for not giving them a gossip morsel to glut that space of their mind reserved for horror tales. Hell, when anybody asks how a corpse looks, I want to scream, "Dead. They look dead. And you'll look dead. And if anybody says you look better than you ever have, it's a damn insult. Besides, it's a little late to be worrying about your looks by the time they put you in your display case."

Sorry, guess I got a little carried away. Anyway, I signed the guest book, went in, and looked around for a seat. Everywhere, the people were clumped together like little ant hills. Most had already drifted from the dear-me-this-is-terrible remarks to the cocktail party conversation.

On my left was a boy with warm brown eyes set off by crisp hair of the same color, about my age, so I decided another social contact wouldn't hurt. I sat down (the chair squeaked—a most unsexy sound) and said, "I'm Nesla Ginlam, a friend of Ellen's from school."

"I'm David Bursley, Ellen's younger brother."

Well, I guess I've been to two dozen funerals and, to tell the truth, I've never once really had to talk to a member of the family. Since I was already in over my eyebrows, I couldn't swim out without splashing, so I decided to stay in for a few polite phrases and then get the hell out of there. To think he was younger, too.

"David, I-I'm sorry." That seemed standard enough. Glad-to-meet-you can be embarrassing in such situations.

He stared at me for a second while I suffered a thousand agonies waiting for him to say something. Finally, a half-smile came to his face. "Really? I'm not sorry. Since you were the only girl to come from the University, you must have been relatively close to Ellen. If you were that close, I don't think you are really sorry either."

I couldn't resist his directness; here was a person I'd have to be honest with. "Okay, I'm not actually sorry, I'm not exactly curious, and I never was one to go in for professional demonstrations of respect for those who have left us." I don't know why I came—care to make any guesses?

Before replying, David turned to the tiny man with the wide tie who had just come up and was standing there spasmodically twisting the hat he clutched.

"Hello, Mr. Brown."

The little man lowered his eyes, twisted his hat some more, and finally spoke. "Hello, David."

Again, silence. David motioned to a chair, causing Mr. Brown to come back to life. "Oh, no, I can't sit down. I-I, well, I just wanted to tell you that I'm sorry about—about—well, about what's happened."

"Mr. Brown, I appreciate that. And I'm sure Ellen would, too."

"Well, I just wanted to tell you." Then, the man bolted away in a stride as uneven as his speech.

David turned back to me. "He really is a nice man, you know."

"Yes, but you don't like him because you don't respect him."

David shrugged his shoulders and added, "He's sincere. I don't dislike him either."

Never mind, though. We were speaking of something more important, and I believe you had just challenged me to try to guess why you're here." He leaned back in his chair and stared at me without smiling. "Okay, I'll guess

that you thought Ellen was a very sensible girl with a great sense of humor and you don't understand why she killed herself. What's more, you thought that maybe you could find out the answer to the 'why' if you came to the funeral. If nothing else, you could judge the family and see if you thought we had made her life miserable."

The slightest trace of contempt would have made me hate him. Instead, I liked him for his unemotional appraisal of the situation. He didn't indict me with a single word, with one false gesture.

"Maybe you're right, David. If that's the reason I came, I didn't realize it. It doesn't make any difference—I've met you and I like you and I have no reason to react differently to the rest of the family."

"You wouldn't, Nesla. However, this only leaves us with our original question—"

"David Bursley!" I haven't seen you since you were *this* high!" A monster in an orange flowered dress towered over us, her flabby fingers pawing the air in ineffectual little thrusts as though she were going to make a dramatic gesture but hadn't enough inner force. "This tragedy is so terrible."

"Yes, intoned David. "Tragedies often are."

"You know something—I remember when Ellen was just a little, bitty baby, asleep in her pink bassinet."

"Just a little, bitty baby—imagine that."

"Do you know, I didn't know a thing about this until this morning when my cousin Paul, I guess he'd be your Aunt Bertie's brother-in-law, told me about it. Well, I just can't tell you how much it distressed me—I drove straight over from Redview. I was just looking at Ellen, and she'd gotten to be such a big girl—I guess all you children are just growing up too fast for my old bones to realize it."

I couldn't take anymore of this crap. "David, (I couldn't screen all the agony out of my voice.) I promised my aunt that I'd be back at 2:00. I think we'd better go now."

David shot me a puzzled look, then bewilderment switched to gratitude. "Oh, yes, that's right. I promised to take Nesla to her aunt's house. It's certainly been nice talking with you."

We started toward the door. The monster followed. One more step, lady, and I'll belt you. The monster stops.

"Now, the next time you're in Redview, I want you to be sure and stop by and see me. I'd hate for it to be another such sad occasion before I see you again. Good-bye. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yes, ma'm. I'll be sure and stop by."

We got to the car before either of us said anything.

"David," I asked through clenched teeth, "who was that?"

"Never saw her before in my life. I guess she just came over for the festivities."

"Well, I'm glad we're away from all those people. Maybe now you can tell me what you were going to before we were invaded."

"I'll explain. The problem is this—I think Ellen was entirely too sensible to commit suicide without seriously weighing the reasons she wanted to live against the reasons she wanted to die. The evidence must have been pretty good; I want to know what it was.

In my opinion, I have an adequate basis for believing that Ellen took such a rational approach to death. You see, Ellen and I had always been extremely close; as kids, we learned how the other would react in almost any situation. Even then, Ellen had a sort of equilibrium that let her take almost anything without being surprised. Once she got to be a teenager, she prostituted herself to the extent that she could manage a shout of joy when a friend got a date or a new dress; but if she had been named Miss America, or been spat upon by a Negro for being white, she would have accepted it, thinking 'No Big Deal.'"

The jeep roared over the highway. We weren't in the city anymore, but had somehow hit the open road. Although the car was faithfully following the ribbon of concrete, I knew David wasn't going anywhere in particular, but was just riding. As long as you're riding, you don't have to look into the eyes of the person to whom you're talking.

David continued. "Her calmness wasn't the main thing, though. Ellen possessed the greatest sense of humor I've ever met. It was almost as if her sense of humor possessed her, instead of the other way around. Only her closest friends ever realized how it governed her life. She always managed to turn a joke so that it was never on herself. Ellen was the epitome of sensibleness combined with humor. She didn't know how to get upset over things. If she had any unpleasant decisions she made them and didn't worry about them. It was her capacity for not worrying that makes me feel there was something unusual about her death.

That's the whole story, Nesla. It comes to this: do you or don't you want to help me find out why Ellen hung herself? Remember — Ellen had her choice, and there is almost the inevitability that after we discover the reasons for Ellen's death, we'll have the same choice to make that she did. I've told you this only because you're young enough to do something about the answer while it still makes a difference in your life—there's nothing more useless than a seventy-year-old man killing himself."

I shouldn't have laughed and I apologized immediately. "David, I'm sorry—I know you're serious, and I am too. I'm joining your search." I looked at David—so young, so capable, so infinitely human. "Don't worry. It won't be too big for us. We'll stare it in the face and either rush into its arms or break its back. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

Just like that, we made a pact, just like little kids promising each other they'll save the world.

The massive door of the funeral parlor screeched the news of its unloiled condition as I peered inside. A man quickly drew me in with mechanical politeness. Scanning the front rows, I discovered that David wasn't there, but then remembered that sometimes the family was off to the side. I saw them now, separated from the grief-mongers by a partially shut screen. Through the opening I spied David sitting with his legs crossed, his hands clasped around his

knees, and a perfectly relaxed expression that made him incongruous with the rest of the audience. I stared at him until he saw me and gave a wave of recognition.

Finally, the pastor appeared, dressed in his sad occasion face. His voice droned through my consciousness like the distant roar of an airplane. All through the chapel, handkerchiefs dotted the pews. In my mind, the sounds mixed—blowing noses, Ellen's laughter, David's voice, "God called this young girl home," Ellen's laughter, sniffing, "her work on earth was completed early," David's wonder, Ellen's laughter, "some things we are not meant to understand," Ellen's laughter, "the road of life is hard," Ellen, damn it, stop laughing, "life is a serious business," Ellen, you heard him, this is serious, "death is a serious business—"

Stop! Ellen, I understand. Oh, God, you damn jokester—you realized that life is a bad practical joke of

fate and, true to yourself, you turned the tables so that the joke was more than ever on the rest of us. You win again—David's laughing now. He's looking at me to see if I understand—I do; I'm laughing, too.

They looked at us. Every one of them lifted their heads and with hypocritical pity called us hysterical. We weren't. This was good, clean laughter, the kind that purges the soul. This laughter started in the toes, rumbled in the belly, and gushed from the mouth like an escaping flood. This laughter was given to us by Ellen and Ellen's laughter can clean out the universe. Right now, Ellen's joke is on us, on everybody—sometime later we'll be sad again; that's why the joke's on us. The perpetual hoax, passed from the mother of mankind to her daughters, had been discovered by Ellen. Even now she was laughing at the two of us who understood—and would never have the courage to act.



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